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A COMPARISON OF PREPARATORY ACADEMIES AND TRADITIONAL HIGH
SCHOOLS IN A LARGE URBAN DISTRICT OF COMPLETION RATE AND STUDENT
PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE CHARACTERISTICS

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of Counseling and Education
The University of Mississippi

by

BEVERLY DABNEY BECTON

August 2014

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ABSTRACT

The problem of high school dropout impacts all sectors of American society. The country's minority youth and its poorest residents are most at-risk of dropping out of school (APA, 2012). Bradshaw, O'Brennan, and McNeely (2008) note Hispanic and Black youths have a higher percentage of dropout events (22% and 11% respectively) compared to 6% of White youth.

In order to create a bridge of support for underperforming at-risk students to stay in school, four Preparatory Academies were instituted in the district under study in 2009. A Preparatory Academy was placed in each region of this district: northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast. The schools were designed to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students using methods research indicate will contribute to at-risk youth staying in school and completing their education.

The purpose of this research was to gauge the effectiveness of Preparatory Academies in providing the intended enhanced academic and social support; and increasing graduation rate. This study utilized the Tripod Student Perception Survey for Secondary Students to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support, and the graduation rate in the four academies, and four traditional high schools serving students with similar socioeconomic status (SES) demographics in the same district. The Tripod Student Perception Survey (TSPS) measures student perceptions of key dimensions of classroom life and teaching practices as student experience them (Ramsdell, 2012).

Results showed the traditional high school students rated perceptions higher for school climate characteristics of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, and academic support; and experienced a higher graduation rate than students attending the Preparatory Academies.

Although the Preparatory Academies students' mean scores for each dependent variable were statistically significantly lower than the traditional students' mean scores, each variable had a positive student mean response rate. The Preparatory Academies seem to hold promise as an intervention program designed to meet the academic, social, and safety needs of at-risk students.

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my nucleus family, Glenn, Randall, Jonathan, Khallee, Yuri, Haylei, Randall, Jr., Eddie, and Kennedy; and to my extended family. Special acknowledgement is extended to my sisters, Margaret and Elizabeth, for their words of encouragement and support. A special tribute to my parents, Mary A. Dabney and Eddie B. Dabney, Sr. for ensuring their children valued education.

To my nieces, nephews, and cousins who are traveling the road of educational knowledge, may you have a clearer view because of my journey.

B.D. Becton

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

1. ANOVA – Analysis of variance
2. F – F distribution, Fisher's F ratio
3. IRB – Institutional Review Board
4. M – Sample mean, arithmetic average
5. N – Total number of cases
6. NCLB – No Child Left Behind
7. OAG – Overage for Grade
8. OAGS – Overage for Grade Students
9. SES – Socio-economic status
10. SY – School year
11. TSPS – Tripod Student Perception Survey

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To God who directs my path, strengthens me, and grants me His favor, thank you!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Education in the United States has evolved with time. Throughout our history, changes in education have been directly related to changes in society. Often, the health and ills of society are mirrored inside the walls of our school buildings. Upon peering into the chronicles which outlines the history of education, there are some age-old problems that persist. One of these persistent problems provides the motivation for this research: The problem of high school dropouts. According to Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990), a dropout is defined as an individual who leaves school prior to high school graduation. A large urban district in the Deep South is working to address the drop-out problem through the creation of four Preparatory Academies. Preparatory Academies were created in 2009 to provide an educational environment for students at risk of dropping out with enhanced academics and social support to increase the likelihood of graduation. The purpose of this research is to gauge the effectiveness of Preparatory Academies in providing the intended enhanced academic and social support, and increasing graduation rates.

High school drop-out rates in the United States are accelerating at an alarming rate. Each decade offers its own staggering drop-out statistics. In the early 1990's, the dropout rate of teenagers numbered 500,000 per year. By the 21st century, one-third of public high school students (in excess of 1 million youth) in the United States leave high school without a diploma (Barton, 2005; Monrad, 2007; Vollstadt, 2000).

While the exact causes for these staggering numbers vary, several factors seem to impact a student's decision to drop out of high school more than others. Grade retention is a major factor. Students who fall behind academically and experience failure in elementary and middle school often are not able to catch up with their peers by the time they reach high school (American Psychological Association, 2012). As a result of repeating a grade, these students become overage for grade (OAG) which increases the likelihood that they will drop out before completing their high school years.

Studies reveal that numerous students, many who come from low socio-economic families, start school without the basic skills needed to be prepared for the kindergarten curriculum (APA, 2012; Barton, 2005; Zuckerbrod, 2007). These students who perform below grade level are identified as having poor academic performance and lack the readiness skills displayed by their middle and upper class peers (Barton, 2005). Many lack the crucial vocabulary needed to relate to grade level texts; and as a result, performs academically below grade level. Below grade level performance has also been linked to another risk factor, behavior problems. Students who lack the skills to complete the assigned task usually resort to distractors to mask deficits or engage in negative behaviors due to idleness (APA, 2012; Barton, 2005; MacIver & Groginsky, 2011).

A high rate of absenteeism is an additional reason cited for the dropout epidemic (MacIver & Groginsky, 2011). Students, who are absent from school, miss out on key instruction necessary to grasp concepts to succeed academically. Thus, excessive absenteeism can lead to poor academic performance. This cycle of "failure" to understand what is being taught fosters a cycle of low to no school commitment, and little to no engagement in school. A loss of student effort coupled with a lack of the basic building blocks in core subjects (reading

and math) leads to course failure (APA, 2012; Barton, 2005; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007; MacIver & Groginsky, 2011; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004).

Students who drop out of high school present enormous and far reaching problems for themselves and society. They are linked to the growth in the prison population, increase in the social welfare population, the increase in healthcare cost, the loss of business development in some U.S. cities, and the decrease in the number of citizens who make up the tax base in the United States' economical system (APA, 2012; Barton, 2005; Muennig, 2006).

Lacking a high school diploma is a personal setback. School dropouts are not educationally prepared to access the opportunities in the United States' economic system of capitalism and free enterprise. Without a high school diploma, many youth struggle to secure a job that provides a living wage. In 2009, the median earning for a worker 25 years or older without a high school diploma was \$18,000. Workers who earned a General Education Diploma (GED) fared better at \$23,000 annually. An average of \$9,000 increase (\$27,000) in earnings was realized for workers 25 years and older who earned a diploma over the workers who dropped out of high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Wishes and dreams for careers are usually suspended as high school dropouts face the reality of not being qualified to attain entry level career positions. According to Vollstadt (2000), students who leave school before graduation often perpetuate the cycle of poverty within their family structure. Many of these students are from single parent households where unemployment is often high. Some reach their teens without seeing any family with a steady - breadwinner (Vollstadt, 2000). In the U.S. 2009 Bureau of the Census report (2012), 15% of

adults over the age of 25 had not completed high school. This statistic offers insight into the prolific number of American adults who left school without obtaining a high school diploma.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of high school dropout impacts all sectors of American society. The country's minority youth and its poorest residents are most at-risk of dropping out of school (APA, 2012). Bradshaw et al, (2008) note Hispanic and Black youths have a higher percentage of dropout events (22% and 11% respectively) compared to 6% of White youth. Research posits that urban youth who grow up in inner city neighborhoods are often at risk of dropping out of school (Zuckerbrod, 2007). As cited in *Facing the School Dropout Dilemma* (APA, 2012), a strong link exists between poverty and high school dropout rates.

Minority and economically depressed students are more likely to experience academic problems leading to below grade level performance or repeating a grade. Grade failure has produced a population of students who are OAG and deemed at-risk. Students who are pursuing a high school education past the typical high school age are at higher risk than others of becoming a dropout (Berlinder, Barrat, Fong, & Shirk, 2008; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Orfield, 2004; West, 1991). In 2003, the high school dropout rate for students in the typical age range for fall high school enrollment (ages 15 through 17) were lower than those for older students (ages 19 through 24). Specifically, 2.5% of 15 to 16-year olds and 2.9% of 17-year olds dropped out in the 1-year reference period, compared to 5.7% of 19-year olds and 20.8% of 20 through 24-year olds (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). In the same reference year, Barton (2005) reported 1.1 million 16- to 19-year-olds and 2.4 million 20- to 25-year olds did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school.

Addressing the academic and social needs of students at-risk of dropping out of school is critical for the academic success of these students in high schools. Graduation is prioritized by policies that include graduation in the ratings of school success or failure.

As a result, graduation rates are cited as the problem which prevents most high schools in the district in which this study is conducted from meeting the standard of success, which is achieving annual yearly progress (AYP), as required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (Danielson, 2009).

During the 2008-09 school year, the urban school district in this study reported enrollment of 4,451 students two or more years OAG in kindergarten through twelfth grades (B. Riedel, personal communication, September, 2010). If students who are one year OAG are factored in, the number drastically increases. The graduation rate for the 2007-08 school-year for this district was 66.9% which fell below the state goal of 90%. Based on research (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; West, 1991), the presence of a large population of overage for grade students (OAGS) would likely forecast a continuous high drop-out rate for this district unless successful strategies are put into place to prevent the OAG population from dropping out of high school.

Implications and Purpose of the Study

The failure of many school districts across the nation to put into place effective strategies to prevent or significantly reduce the number of students who leave school without a diploma or certificate of graduation is a forecast for economic woe (Natriello et al, 1990). High school drop-outs are more likely to suffer lost wages, depend on taxpayer provided healthcare, experience incarceration, and require governmental assistance in the form of food stamps and Aid to Family with Dependent Children (Maynard, 1996; Muennig, 2006). In 2009, the median

earning for a worker 25 years or older without a high school diploma was \$18,000; nine thousand dollars less than a worker 25 years or older who graduated high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In order to create a bridge of support for underperforming at-risk students to stay in school, four Preparatory Academies were instituted in the district under study in 2009. A Preparatory Academy was placed in each region of this district: northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast. The schools were designed to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students using methods research indicates will contribute to at-risk youth staying in school and completing their education. These methods include enriched academics, educational choices, student centered learning, caring environment, and an environment that emphasizes strengths, resources, and interpersonal relationships (Franklin, Streeter, Kim & Tripoli, 2007).

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this research is to gauge the effectiveness of Preparatory Academies in providing the intended enhanced academic and social support and increasing graduation rates. This study will utilize data from the Tripod Student Perception Survey for Secondary Students (a tool designed to measure student perceptions of the classroom instructional environment using seven central constructs called the seven C's: care, control, clarify, challenge, captivate, confer, and consolidate) to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support, and the graduation rate in the four academies, and four traditional high schools serving students with similar SES demographics in the same district. The preparatory academy's program is the independent variable. Student's perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support, and the graduation rate are the dependent variables in this study.

Research Questions

The following research questions are addressed in this study:

- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?
- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of school safety at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of school safety in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?
- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of social support at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of social support in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?
- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of academic support in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?
- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' graduation rate at the four Preparatory Academies and students' graduation rate in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?

These questions will be examined using the following hypothesis:

- H₀1: There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.

- H₀2: There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of school safety at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.
- H₀3: There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of social support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.
- H₀4: There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.
- H₀5: There is no statistically significant difference between student graduation rate at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.

These hypothesis statements will be examined using data from the Tripod Student Perception Survey (TSPS) administered in four intervals over a two-year period (fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013), and graduation data from School Report Cards. TSPS and graduation data from the four Preparatory Academies in the district will be compared with TSPS and graduation data from four traditional high schools serving a similar population of students.

As stated above, the TSPS is a survey instrument designed to assess student perceptions of the classroom instructional environment using seven central constructs called the seven C's (cares, control, clarify, challenge, captivate, confer, and consolidate) (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010). This study will utilize four of the seven constructs which are listed below. These four constructs (care, control, clarify and confer) are closely aligned to the Preparatory

Academies' mission statement to provide a safe learning environment which supports students academically and socially (<http://www.scsk12.org>).

1. Care – pertains to teacher behaviors that help students to feel emotionally safe and to rely on the teacher to be a dependable ally in the classroom (**social support**).
2. Control – pertains to classroom management (**safety**).
3. Clarify – concerns teacher behaviors that promote understanding. Interactions that clear up confusion and help students persevere. This construct deals with multiple ways of explaining ideas, differentiation of instruction and student work (**academic support**).
4. Confer – concerns seeking students' point of view by asking them questions and inviting them to express themselves. Teacher show he/she values students' points of view thereby providing positive reinforcement. This construct impacts the learning community by attending to social reinforcement (**social support**).

Using a quasi-experimental, ex post facto design, the TSPS will be used to discover if there is a difference between students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, and academic support in the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools. The school district's School Report Cards for 2011-12 academic school year and 2012-13 academic school year will be used to compare graduation rates from the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) will be used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between students' perceptions and graduation rates at the four academies and the four traditional high schools.

Limitations

Constraints of available data and the nature of the Preparatory Academies' programs result in several limitations to this study:

- The ex post facto data will be collected from one school system; therefore, the population of the study is restricted to low SES students in the subjects' school district. This limits generalizability of findings to other districts.
- Because data from OAGS still in traditional schools is unavailable; schools serving primarily low SES students are used as a comparison group in this research. While the study is comparing two types of schools that served low SES students, the unique characteristics of OAGS may result in some distortion of the findings.
- The designation of schools focused on serving low SES students in a large urban district limits the relevance and generalizability of the study to districts who serve non-low SES students and schools that serve students in rural areas.

Definition of Key Terms

Academic support – Varied assistance provided to ensure students are receiving the scholarly help needed to be successful in their studies. This type of support focuses on teacher behaviors that promote understanding, interactions that clear up confusion and help students persevere, methods of explaining ideas, and differentiation of instruction. It is measured in this research using the TSPS domain “Clarify.”

At-risk – Describes students or groups of students who are considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school. Risk factors are based on various circumstances (e.g., homelessness, pregnancy, and transiency) or conditions (e.g., disciplinary problems, grade retentions, low test scores) that could adversely affect the

educational performance and attainment of some students (Great Schools Partnership, Inc., 2013).

Captivate – This construct as assessed through the TSPS concerns teacher behaviors that make instruction stimulating, interesting, and relevant to things about which students already care (Ramsdell, 2012).

Care – This construct as assessed through the TSPS pertains to teacher behaviors that help students to feel emotionally safe and to rely on the teacher to be a dependable ally in the classroom. Used in this research as a measure of social support (Ramsdell, 2012).

Challenge – This construct as assessed through the TSPS concerns both effort and rigor pressing students to work hard and to think hard. Challenging teachers tend to monitor student effort and to confront students if their effort is unsatisfactory. Students who do not think deeply or reason their way through challenging questions are both supported and pushed (Ramsdell, 2012).

Clarify – This construct as assessed through the TSPS concerns teacher behaviors that promote understanding. Interactions that clear up confusion and help students persevere. This construct deals with multiple ways of explaining ideas, differentiation of instruction, and student work. Used in this research as a measure of academic support (Ramsdell, 2012).

Completion rate – The percentage of students who graduate from high school (Barton, 2005)

Confer – This construct as assessed through the TSPS concerns seeking students' point of view by asking them questions and inviting them to express themselves. Teacher shows he/she values students' points of view thereby providing positive reinforcement. This

construct impacts the learning community attending to social reinforcement. This construct is also used in this research as a measure of social support (Ramsdell, 2012).

Consolidate – This construct as assessed through the TSPS concerns how teachers help students to organize material for more effective encoding in memory and for more efficient reasoning (Ramsdell, 2012).

Control – This construct as assessed through the TSPS pertains to classroom management. Teachers demonstrate skills to manage student propensities towards off-task or out-of-order behaviors. Effective control helps to maintain order and to make the classroom environment safe. This construct is used in this research as a measure of school safety (Ramsdell, 2012).

Drop-out – A student who leaves school prior to high school graduation (McDill & Pallas, 1990).

Drop-out factories - High schools where a senior class is made up of 60% or fewer of the students who entered as a freshman (Zuckerbrod, 2007)

Graduation rate – Measures the percent of students who graduate from high school with a regular diploma within four years and a summer out of those students that entered the ninth grade four years earlier (TN Dept. of Education website)

Human capital – The abilities and skills of any individual, especially those acquired through investment in education and training that enhance potential income earning (Malik, 2013).

Over-age for grade – A student who is one or more years over-age for grade due to repetition of a grade level.

Perception – Individual sensory experience of the world around us, including both the recognition of environmental stimuli and actions in response to these stimuli (Cherry, 2014).

Preparatory Academies – Specialized non-traditional high schools located in each of the four regions of this large urban school district. These schools were created in 2009 to support the academic, social, and security needs of at risk students in grades 9 – 12.

Safe Environment – A respectful, learning focused setting where it is safe to learn (Hurtwitz, Menacker, &Weldon, 1996)

Social Support – Assistance that is available from a significant person that addresses one's need to belong and to be a part of a caring system. A supportive environment where students feel valued, supported and encouraged (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Outline of the Study

Chapter 1 of this dissertation introduces the study by providing the problem to be addressed, purpose of the research, research questions, and a brief overview of the research design. Chapter 2 of this study presents current research on the topic of high school drop-outs and efforts to address the problem. This chapter includes the far reaching impact the decision to drop out of high school has on society as well as the drop-out. Chapter 3 identifies the design of the study, providing information about the population and sample, instruments, and the statistical test that was used to analyze the data. Chapter 4 examines the results of this study through data findings and analysis. Chapter 5 summarizes the study's findings, implications, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dropping out of school is a long term process of disengagement that occurs over time and begins in the earliest grades (Barton, 2005). Preventing students from leaving school before graduation continues to be one of the leading problems facing the American education system. School districts, state governments, and the federal government continuously seek solutions to lower drop-out rates. Risk factors associated with dropping out include the individual characteristics, the home environment (social support, family structure, socio-economic status of the family), the community (level of school support), and the school (climate, student support) (APA, 2012; Davis & Dupper, 2004). Barton (2005) records that amongst these factors two are found to have a much higher than average influence on individuals who drop out of school: the family and the school experience.

Students have been surveyed to find out reasons for not completing high school. For decades surveys have posed questions differently; however, Barton (2005) declared students' responses have remained relatively constant. Recurring reasons given by students are pregnancy, falling behind in school, not liking school, and needing or wanting to go to work. Due to the wide range of reasons students drop out of high school, the field of research varies on how to address dropout prevention.

Cohen and Smerdon (2009) sought to address the issue of who would drop out of school and proposed that every high school initiative should focus on ninth grade and the transition from middle to high school. They looked at the effect of student movement from one grade

structure (k – 6 vs. k – 8) to another (9 – 12) and its impact on students' ability to adjust and adapt in high school. This research found great promise in the use of on-track indicators for identifying students at risk of dropping out of school. This program used ninth-grade credit accumulation and freshman course semester failures, eighth grade students' attendance rate (80% or less) and course failure (math or English) as at-risk indicators and predictors.

Christle, et al. (2007) and Suh and Suh (2007) researched factors contributing to high school dropout. Results found five out of twelve identified variables as high predictors of potential dropouts. According to this research, students who are at-risk students come from lower socio-economic status (SES) background, receive suspensions from school, and experience school-board infractions or law violations (behavior problems). Suh and Suh (2007) classified students who were considered potential dropouts into three major at-risk categories: low grade point average (GPA), low SES, and behavioral problems. They concluded that multiple-risk factors influence the decisions of students who drop out of school. The researchers conclude support needed for early intervention should be based not only on age and grade level, but also on the surfacing of a variety of specific risk factors.

Gleason and Dynarski (2002) suggested risk factors dropout prevention programs commonly seek to address are not always good predictors of who will drop out of school. While the results supported the composite risk factor model (risk factors based on multiple characteristics) over the single risk factor as a predictor of who will drop out, the authors cautioned composite risk models may misdiagnose students as potential dropouts and fail to identify students in danger of dropping out.

Other researchers (Wirth-Bond, 1991) examined the effectiveness of high school dropout prevention programs. This research hypothesized a student's interaction with counselors makes a

difference in his/her decision to remain in school. In this study, of 119 students who were deemed high risk of dropping out of high school, more than fifty percent (sixty-four) identified school counselors as the most significant school-based person in their life. Wirth-Bond concluded that a significant other in the school setting can have a positive effect in the lives of students who are at risk of dropping out of high school but this individual may not in himself or herself determine whether a student remain in school.

Pittman (1991) questioned whether vocational/technical education, had any “holding power” in keeping at-risk students in school. This research examined whether vocational programs are a significant factor in keeping students in school and whether social factors made a difference. Pittman found that there was little correlation between dropout status and the level of participation in vocational courses. However, his study did reveal some correlation, though not significant, that social relationship with both peers and staff are important and impact the graduation rate (Pittman, 1991).

In a five year study, Berlinder, et al. (2008) examined the reenrollment of high school dropouts in a large urban district. Guiding questions were established at the onset of the program to direct the study. The results revealed the majority of dropout events and re-enrollment in this urban district occurred at ninth grade. The data showed reenrollment declining among students who dropped out in subsequent grades. This research supports the premise that as students experience factors that are considered “at-risk”; the likelihood of them remaining in school diminishes with time. At-risk students are usually experiencing difficulty in achievement measures and possess some academic grade-level deficits. All re-enrollees interviewed cite credit deficiency as the primary deterrent to staying in school the first and the second time

around. Of the 419 students who reenrolled, only 18.4% graduated high school and earned a diploma within a five year time frame.

The questions addressing who drops out, what school factors are related to dropping out, when students drop out, and why students drop out generate many different answers from research; yet, researchers agree that the problem of high school dropout has serious and wide reaching consequences to society and to the future of the dropout. Yet, many of these studies create a body of work which provides a broad range of solutions for such a complex problem.

Drop-out Statistics

An educated citizenry is a valuable resource to a nation. Through education, children develop their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Education is a process which improves economic, social, and personal power. From an educated population, a nation establishes its social and political policies which govern its people. Sadly, over a million American high school students drop out each year; thereby, failing to gain the basic requirement of the great equalizer, education. Leading the way in the dropout percentages are youth of color (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011; Monrad, 2007).

There are sexual, racial, regional, cultural, and age differences in educational attainment. A greater percentage of women complete high school than do men (APA, 2012). The American Psychological Association (2012) reports a dropout ratio of 8.5% male to 7.5% female in the overall gender category. The report also notes that Latino males have the most pronounced ratio (19.9% to 16.7%) of male vs. female dropouts. When comparing the dropout rate of African American males to African American female, the trend shifted in favor of the males. African American women lead the drop-out rate by 2.4% (11.1% to 8.7% respectively).

Race continues to be a deciding factor as to who is most at risk of dropping out of school. Barton (2005) looks at the completion rate of ethnic groups in states where the racial and ethnic data were available. According to Barton:

For white students in 40 states, the high rate was 93% for North Dakota, and the low rate was 61% in Florida. For Black students in 33 states, the high was 73% in New Mexico and the low was 44% in Wisconsin. For Hispanic students in 23 states, the high was 74% in Louisiana and the low was 42% in New York. For Asian students in 28 states, the high was 94% in Arkansas and the low was 65% in Mississippi.

Barton's research lists the summative completion rate percentages for each ethnic group as follows: White students – 72%; Blacks student – 51%; Hispanic students – 52%; and Asian students – 70%. African American and Hispanic students continue to drop out at a significantly higher rate than do other ethnic groups.

As noted in Barton's (2005) research, a disparity in the drop-out rate is seen in regions of the United States. The North, West, and South have the highest dropout rate when compared to other regions of our country. Eighty percent of schools known as "dropout factories" primarily reside in these regions with the highest concentrations of dropout factories in large cities or in high poverty rural areas.

Dropout factories are high schools where a senior class is made up of 60% or fewer of the students who entered as a freshman (APA, 2012; Zuckerbrod, 2007). In a research report conducted by the John's Hopkins Center, the three states with the highest percentage of drop-out factories are South Carolina with 51.89%, Florida with 51.1% and Nevada with 41.07% (Zuckerbrod, 2007). Dropout factories represent 12% of the total high schools in our nation yet they produce 50% of the dropouts. It was estimated that 2.1 million students attended dropout

factories in 2009 (APA, 2012). Balfanz & Legter (2004) reported the rarity of finding predominately white schools with weak promoting power. The nation's drop-out factories overwhelmingly serve minority students.

Educational attainment differs for those who are born in the United States compared to student who are foreign born residents. U.S. Census (2012) records foreign born residents make up 35% of the population that are high school dropouts. Sixty eight percent (68%) of foreign born residents aged 25 or older completed high school compared to 89% of native born residents. When viewing the age of the students when they dropout, a consistent trend is noted; older students bear the greatest risk of leaving school before graduation (APA, 2012). Students who are overage for grade fall into the high risk dropout category. In the OAG category, older students between the ages of 20 through 24 are at a greater risk of dropping out than students aged 15 through 17 (APA, 2012).

In 2003, the high school dropout rate for students in the typical age range for fall high school enrollment (ages 15 through 17) were lower than those for older students (ages 19 through 24) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Specifically, 2.5% of 15 to 16-year olds and 2.9% of 17-year olds dropped out in the 1-year reference period, compared with 5.7% of 19-year olds and 20.8% of 20 through 24-year olds (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

The Social Impact of High School Dropout

High school dropout rates indirectly impact the social, economic, and political health of society. A decisions made by a younger person to leave school, takes its toll on the future prospects of the individual, the family, and society (Maynard, 1996; Muennig, 2006). Our country's economic strength is tied into a well-educated and prepared citizenry. Young people who are ill-prepared to work look to the government for assistance.

Students who drop-out of school are more likely to suffer lost wages, depend on taxpayer provided healthcare, experience incarceration, and require governmental assistance in the form of food stamps and Aid to Family with Dependent Children (Maynard, 1996; Muennig, 2006).

Lost wages.

Educational attainment is a determining factor of a person's earning potential. Earnings impact our nation's economic health. Our governments are supported by a system of taxes on earnings. The more income a person earns, the more growth our economy realizes. This growth shows up in our market places. The median earning of a person without a high school diploma is \$18,000 compared to workers with regular high school diploma earnings of \$27,000 (U.S. Census, 2012). The impact of individuals dropping out of school includes lost wages to our economy. According to the US Census (2012), an estimated \$335 billion could have been realized in the U.S. economy if dropouts from the class of 2009 had graduated.

Monrad (2007) maintains that in 2004 over one million students in the U.S. did not graduate from high school. These 1.3 million high school dropouts cost more than \$325 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over their lifetime. With the projected forecast of the minority population's (noted as having the highest dropout rate) growth out pacing the growth of the overall population, the trend in social cost will continue to rise (Kelly, 2006). If the trend is reversed by bringing in line the graduation rates of the minority student with those of white students by 2020, Kelly predicts the overall population educational attainment will increase. This increase will have a positive impact on our economy.

Healthcare.

Muennig (2006) alleges the high school drop-out epidemic has added to the health-care cost moving to the number one expense in states' budgets. Considering a state's dropout rate,

the total savings in uninsured cost and Medicaid expense were projected to range from a low of \$19,936,815 (District of Columbus) to a high of \$2,325,813,659 (California) in 2006 dollars if all students graduated in the class of 2005 – 06. In this projection model (analysis of the impact that high school graduation and or college graduation would have on state's health care savings), the state of Tennessee would recognize a savings in state Medicaid and state uninsured cost of \$12,182 per additional graduate. If all students in the class of 2005 – 06 graduated, Tennessee's saving would have reached \$350,253,748 (Muennig, 2006). The expected health care savings projected to states' coffers by preventing high school dropouts warrant a search for effective drop-out prevention solutions.

Incarceration.

The risk factor of incarceration for a male dropout (16 – 24 years old) is 6.3 times higher than a male who graduates from high school (APA, 2012). Crime and dropouts are linked together. Youth who drop out of school are more likely to participate in illegal activities as a way to increase their income. It is estimated that approximately 75% of state prison inmates and 59% of federal inmates are dropouts (Monrad, 2007). The average annual cost of maintaining a prisoner is at least three times higher than the annual dollars expended to educate a school-age child (Hale & Canter, 1998). Monrad (2007) cites that high school dropouts cost the U.S. economy over \$8 billion in incarceration expenses and lost wages.

Drop-out Prevention

Preventing students from dropping out of school before graduation is the goal of many school districts nationwide. However, the answers to solving the problem of high school students dropping out of school before graduation continues to elude education and governmental systems. Researchers seek solutions to stopping or at least decreasing the

enormous number of high school students who drop out each year. Prevention models vary, often focusing on identified reasons students decide to leave school without graduating.

Somers and Piliawsky (2004) reported that not all interventions designed to prevent students from dropping out of school are successful. After reviewing the literature on risk factors that have been associated with students who drop out of school, they noted that effective intervention programs must address more than one risk factor. They based their research on the results of two longitudinal studies conducted in 1997 that identified the strongest predictors (achievement, grade retention, and school commitment) of why students leave school before graduation.

Dynarski, Clark, Coby, Finn, Rumberger, and Smink (2008) proposed that intervention programs should be designed to address more than one risk factor. They recommended a six-prong approach to address dropout prevention. These steps include utilizing data that identifies students at high risk of dropping out (e.g., attendance, disciplinary actions, academic progress, and school interest), helping students improve academically and to reengage in school, providing programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills, assigning adult advocates, creating a learning environment where academic, social and behavior success is encouraged, and providing relevant and rigorous coursework.

The theory of human capital may be associated with the outcomes produced by high school dropouts as well as to those who graduate and continue in their pursuit of improvement. Human capital theory focuses on the abilities and skills of any individual, especially those acquired through investment in education and training, which enhance potential income earning. Each year, the United Nations produces a report on Human Development (Malik, 2013). The report looks at the Human Development Index (the combination of life expectancy

index, education index, and income index) which measures key indicators used to predict the future success of a nation. The education index reveals the educational standard and literacy ratio of the population (“Human Capital”, 2013). If all of the three aforementioned indexes have a rising trend over an extended period of time, it is a forecast of significant progress for that nation.

The Human Development Report of 2013 (Malik, 2013) examines nations who are focusing their investing in their people. This report lists education as one of the most powerful instrument for greater equity in promoting human development. It is projected by 2020 the combined economic output of three leading developing countries alone (Brazil, China, and India) will surpass the aggregate production of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States (Malik, 2013). In years past the U.S. was number one in graduation rate among all nations; however, in 2009 the United States ranked 21 out of 26 in high school graduation rate among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Cardoza, 2012). Portugal and Slovenia tied for first place. Japan and Finland hold the number two spot (Cardoza, 2012).

As noted, in Human Development Reports (Malik, 2013), economic growth alone is not the independent driver that determines human development progress. Rather, significant investments in individual capacity through a focus on education, nutrition and health, and employment skills can expand access to sufficient work and provide for sustained progress. When we view education from a global perspective, high school graduation is critical to the success of a nation’s economic success and growth.

The increasing interest in non-traditional educational programs for high-risk students, such as, charter schools, alternative programs, and innovation schools holds promise as a

possible strategy for meeting the needs of some at-risk youth (Bradshaw et al., 2008). These researchers posit that more rigorous evaluations of non-traditional educational programs long-term outcomes are needed.

Student Perceptions

Attribution theory states that an individual's perceptions, whether valid or invalid, impact the meaning of a situation or event ("Student Perceptions of School"). A person's perceptions have an impact on his or her emotions and behaviors. In turn, emotional and behavioral reactions to perceptions help to shape a person's environments and skew their views of one's environment ("Student Perceptions of School"). Perception is our sensory experience of the world around us and involves both the recognition of environmental stimuli and actions in response to these stimuli (Psychology.com). The concept of perception highly influences students as they interact in the learning environment as well as in all facets of their lives.

Schools can be a positive or negative force in a students' achievement level. Schools can impact a student's desire to remain in school; especially, when their educational experience is coupled with strong social factors, e.g., low socio-economic conditions, pregnancy, lack of family support, problems with the law, or negative peer pressures (Bradshaw, et al., 2008; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). When students are faced with one or more of these negative social factors, their perceptions of their relationship with teachers and the school environment may be a deciding factor as to whether to stay in school or drop out of school. Students who have a support system in place at school, where they feel comfortable sharing their emotional thoughts to a responsible adult, are more likely to choose to stay in school (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Wirth-Bond, 1991). According to Davis and Dupper (2004), the quality of the relationship between the student and teacher significantly impacts a student's success.

These authors posited that students who are in an environment that fosters and values caring relationships perform better, have fewer behavioral problems, and are intrinsically motivated to excel academically. A classroom environment which supports social, emotional, and academic learning has a positive effect on students' perception. In an educational setting where safety and order, caring relationship between students and teachers, and high academic expectations and support are present, students' attitude, behavior, and academic performance levels improve (APA, 2012).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

High school dropout numbers in the United States are accelerating at an alarming rate. In the United States, over one million youth drop out of school each year (Barton, 2005; Monrad, 2007). Students who drop out of school present enormous and far reaching problems for themselves and society. Without a high school diploma, many youth struggle to secure a job that provides a living wage; often leading to high unemployment, dependency on government assistance, and incarceration.

A large urban school district in the Deep South is working to address the drop-out problem through the creation of four Preparatory Academies. Preparatory Academies were created in 2009 to provide an educational environment for students at risk of dropping out with enhanced academics and social support to increase the likelihood of graduation. The instructional program is organized to allow students the opportunity to accelerate their course work to achieve the required credits to graduate. Each student has an individualized learning plan which details his or her path and time line to graduation. Because of the extended school day (nine hours) and the 11 month school year, students can earn more credits toward graduation. Students who enter the Preparatory Academy in ninth grade can graduate in two years and six months opposed to the traditional high school timeline of four years and a summer. Regardless of the student's age, once they enter ninth grade, they have four years and a summer to graduate and count towards the school's graduation rate. For example, if a student enters

ninth grade at age 16, he or she has four years and a summer to graduate. Without the acceleration of credit accrual, this student would be 20 years or older when the credit requirements are met. Research (Dianda, 2008) has established that students who are OAG are more at risk of dropping out of school. Specifically, students between the ages of 20 to 24, dropped out at a rate of 20% in the one year reference period of 2003 in comparison to drop-out rates for 15 to 16-year olds (2.5%), 17-year olds (2.9%), and 19-year old (5.7%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

The purpose of this research was to gauge the effectiveness of Preparatory Academies in providing the intended enhanced academic and social support and increasing graduation rate. The following chapter identifies the quasi experimental, ex post facto design of the study, including information about the population and sample, instruments, and the statistical test that was used to analyze the data.

Participants

The population of this study was 9th - 12th grade students living in poverty (defined by receiving free or reduced lunch) who as a result of poverty are at risk of dropping out. The population was further defined as students who attended the subject district at some point during SY 2011-12 and SY 2012-13. In this quasi-experimental, ex post facto study, the treatment sample for the dependent variable was all students enrolled in the four Preparatory Academies who completed the TSPS in one of four survey cycles in fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013. Students attending one traditional high school from each area served by a Preparatory Academy, for a total of four traditional high schools, were selected as members of the comparison group. Each comparison school was selected based on its location in the district under study, and significant enrollment of students with similar socioeconomic status

demographics as the students attending the Preparatory Academies. Control schools also included enrollment counts close to Preparatory Academies' enrollment counts, and students were administered the TSPS during the four survey cycles used in this study. TSPS data from these four high schools collected during the same four survey periods (fall 2011, spring 2012, fall, 2012, spring 2013) provided the comparison data. All four comparison group schools had over 80 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Analyses of variance (ANOVA) statistics was used to compare the TSPS data to determine whether a statistically significant difference existed between perception of students in the Preparatory Academies and similar students in the traditional high schools regarding teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, and academic support. ANOVA was also use to compare graduation rates in the academies and in the traditional comparison schools. The Preparatory Academies and the four comparison high schools are located in the four regions of this large urban school district: northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest. The total enrollment figure for the Preparatory Academies is 994 students. The four comparison high schools have a total enrollment figure of 1,588 students.

In comparing the data from these two types of schools, the researcher sought to determine if there existed a statistically significant difference between students' perception of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support, and the graduation rates in the four preparatory academies, and the four traditional high schools serving students with similar SES demographics in the same district by using the following hypotheses:

- H_01 : There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.

- H₀2: There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of school safety at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.
- H₀3: There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of social support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.
- H₀4: There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.
- H₀5: There is no statistically significant difference between student graduation rate at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.

Research Design

The quasi-experimental post-test only design (Creswell, 2008) is shown in Table 1. In this study, the independent variable is the Preparatory Academy's programs and the dependent variables are students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support, and graduation rates. The four traditional comparison high schools served as the control groups. The control groups received no treatment (students did not experience the Preparatory Academy's program).

According to the director of Innovative Schools for the district under study, the preparatory academies intentionally focus on the learning environment and the school's climate (Ludlow, 2009). These schools offer an innovative, rich, rigorous, and engaging program designed to address the individual academic and developmental needs of students. The

instructional program includes on-line courses, internships/externships for credit, dual enrollment in the area community college, mini-courses, and comprehensive exams for credit. Additionally, students complete rigorous academic study with technical skill-based instruction that will prepare them to acquire valuable training in their field of study. Other approaches to learning includes cooperative and team teaching, cooperative small group instruction, instruction with behavioral interventions, and instruction that focuses on the various learning styles of the students. Each student has a customized individualized learning path which details the most expedient learning plan as they work toward graduation. Because of the extended school day and school year, students can accumulate 10-12 credits per year. Students who enter in ninth grade can graduate in two years and six months opposed to the traditional high school timeline of four years and a summer. The Preparatory Academies have no sequential grade structure. In order to graduate, each student needs 22 credit hours in subjects specified by the state department of education. The intensive counseling component integrated into the academic program allows counselors to connect with each student to obtain a detailed profile to outline any mental, physical, or social challenges that may factor into difficulties he or she might experience in school (“Alternative Schools”, 2014). The treatment groups received the Preparatory Academy’s program. The TSPS results and graduation rates were used as the post-test for each research question.

Table 1

Study Design: Quasi-Experimental Post-test only

Group	Treatment	Post-test
Control Group: Four Traditional High Schools	No Treatment	TSPS Results Graduation Rate
Experimental Group: Preparatory Academies	Preparatory Academy's Programs	TSPS Results Graduation Rate

The SY 2011-12 and SY 2012-13 School Report Cards from each of the four Preparatory Academies and the four comparison high schools were used to gather data on the graduation rate. The annual Report Card is a comprehensive showcase of school-level data for each school year. The Report Card includes demographics, achievement results, accountability progress, value-added data, attendance figures, and graduation rate (Tennessee Department of Education, 2013).

The TSPS measures students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, and academic support. This survey is a Likert Scale with the following choices: totally untrue, mostly untrue, somewhat, mostly true, and totally true. The survey measures students' perception of the classroom instructional environment using seven central constructs called the seven Cs. (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010). The seven C's framework is built upon whether teachers *care*, have *control* of the class, *clarify* concepts, *challenge* students, *captivate* by engaging students, *confer* by allowing students to share their thoughts, and *consolidate* the learning through summarization (Crow, 2011). Previous administration of the Tripod surveys are used by the district to measure classroom gains on standardized achievement test by students rating on the Seven Cs. Data from the TSPS has been found to have a significant correlation between greater average achievement gains in classrooms in which students rated their teachers

higher on the Seven Cs (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010). Data from the TSPS can be used to analyze the impact of the teacher and student relationship across different constructs. These constructs include student engagement, classroom learning conditions, teaching practices, youth culture, and school climate. The Tripod survey is administered annually or bi-annually in the subject school district and used by individual schools within the district to improve and/or sustain school climate, teaching practices, and academic achievement.

The Tripod student perceptions assessment is based upon classroom-level surveys developed over the past decade by the Tripod Project for School Improvement. The Tripod Project was founded by Ronald F. Ferguson and refined in consultation with K-12 teachers and administrators in participating schools and districts and, as of 2007, colleagues at Cambridge Education. Cambridge Education deploys the surveys and does associated reporting as a service to participating schools (Ferguson, 2010). This survey was initiated in the district under study in 2009 as a component of a \$90 million Intensive Partnership grant awarded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This grant funded the Teacher Effectiveness Initiative, a focused plan to increase teacher effectiveness by empowering them for student success (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation). The TSPS serves as an instrument to collect students' perspectives of their learning environment in hopes to ensure that all students have access to effective teachers in every classroom.

Over the past decade, several hundred thousand elementary, middle- and high-school students have completed Tripod surveys in hundreds of schools across the United States, Canada and China. Items have been added and replaced each year to gradually develop a stable set of valid and reliable measures (Ferguson, 2010).

The quasi-experimental, ex post facto design of this study gauged the effectiveness of Preparatory Academies in providing the intended enhanced academic and social support and increasing graduation rates. The degree and strength of association between variables were used to answer the five research questions. The statistical analyses process ANOVA was used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the at-risk students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, and academic support and graduation rates in the Preparatory Academies and in the four comparison schools.

The traditional high schools, the control group, serve students in grades 9 – 12 and are designed on a seven block schedule. Various schools design their bell schedule to reflect anywhere from 55 minute classes to classes lasting over one hour. Students usually attend classes on split days (MWF and TThF). Students attend school seven hours per day and attend a maximum of seven classes. Students take the first half of these courses during the first semester of school (August – December) and earn 0.5 credits if course is successfully completed. At the beginning of the second semester (January – May), students continue to take the second half of the courses they were enrolled in during the first semester. Students earn 0.5 credits for each course successfully completed. At the end of the school year, a student can earn up to seven credit hours towards graduation. Each student must choose a focused plan of study from the following selections: Liberal Arts, Career and Technical, Fine Arts, and Advanced Placement.

The Preparatory Academies, the experimental treatment group, serve students in grades 9 – 12 and are designed on a five by five schedule. Students are enrolled in five ninety-minute classes. Each class is attended five days per week. The school day is extended by one and one-half hours, to an eight hour and forty-five minute day. At the end of the semester (August – December), students are eligible to receive up to a total of five credit hours. The second

semester is scheduled from January – May. Students are enrolled in five different courses. The school day and course time frames remain the same as in the first semester. At the end of the second semester, students are eligible to receive an additional five credit hours. During one school year, a student who attends a Preparatory Academy can earn ten credit hours towards graduation.

All students graduating from the Preparatory Academies and traditional high schools must earn 22 credit hours in order to graduate. An end of course examination is given in English I, English II, English III, Algebra I, Algebra II and Biology I. The results of these examinations are factored as a percentage into the students' course grade.

There seems to be advantages and challenges for students who attend the Preparatory Academies. These students can earn more credits in a given year. Yet, to do this, students must attend school more hours each day. They also have a longer school year with the opportunity to accrue hours during the months of June – July. Students attending a Preparatory Academy obtain additional academic hours in a more concise time frame (one semester opposed to two semesters). If a student is at-risk, it often indicates that the student has experienced academic difficulty brought on by varied factors. It may be further assumed the student may be performing below grade level in one or more academic areas. Accelerated coursework typically requires more support for at-risk students.

Procedures

Permission to perform this study was sought from the dissertation committee and the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB). Approval was granted to proceed with the study. Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Department of Research and Evaluation of the subject school district.

Data from the TSPS administered in fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012 and spring 2013 for the Preparatory Academies and the comparison schools was secured from this district's Department of Research and Evaluation. Graduation rates and dropout event rates for school years 2011-12 and 2012-13 for each of the Preparatory Academies and the comparison schools was secured from the School Report Card located on the Tennessee Department of Education website. The School Report Card includes demographics, achievement results, accountability progress, value-added data, attendance figures, and graduation rate.

Data Analysis

Comparison of group mean inferential statistics was used to analyze the data. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between mean student perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support, and graduation rates at the four academies and the four traditional high schools. School Report Cards data from the 2011-12 academic school year and 2012-13 academic school year was used to compare graduation rates from the four Preparatory Academies and the four comparison high schools. The TSPS for fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013 was used to discover if there is a statistically significant difference between students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, and academic support in the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools.

The importance of completing high school has been emphasized as a measure of future success for many students. Research shows students in the United States are dropping out of school each year at alarming rates; resulting in economic and social problems for local, state, and federal governments (Barton, 2005; Maynard, 1996; Muennig, 2006; Monrad, 2007, Vollstadt, 2000). This research was designed to discover the relationship between students' perceptions of

teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support, and the graduation rate. Through examining the TSPS data and the graduation rate, the research was designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Preparatory Academies in achieving their stated purpose.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Overview

Preventing students from leaving school before graduation continues to be one of the leading problems facing the American education system. In 2009, a large urban school district in the south instituted an alternative school program to address the dropout problem of at-risk students and OAGS. The program design of the Preparatory Academies focuses on the social, emotional, and academic needs of students using researched based best practices to support at-risk learners. These methods included enriched academics, educational choices, student centered learning, caring environment, and an environment that emphasizes strengths, resources, and interpersonal relationships (Franklin et al, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to gauge the effectiveness of the Preparatory Academies in providing the intended enhanced academic and social support, and increasing graduation rates. The study was conducted using data from the TSPS for the four Preparatory Academies and the four comparison traditional high schools (serving students with similar SES demographics) to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, and academic support, and the graduation rates at the different types of schools.

Data from the surveys administered in fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013 was used in this study. The graduation rate for 2012 school year and 2013 school year for the schools under study was secured from the School Report Card. The statistical analysis,

ANOVA, was employed using SPSS for Windows, Version 21. The alpha level for all statistical analyses was set as ($p = .05$).

Findings of the study are presented in this chapter. This chapter presents the data analysis and discusses findings of the following research questions:

- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?
- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of school safety at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of school safety in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?
- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of social support at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of social support in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?
- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of academic support in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?
- Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' graduation rate at the four Preparatory Academies and students' graduation rate in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?

Population

The population of this study was 9th – 12th grade students who attended the Preparatory Academies and the comparison traditional high schools during the SY 2011 – 12 and SY 2012 – 13. There were a total of 7,152 respondents who answered all of the survey questions during the

four administrations (fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013) of the TSPS. See Table 2 for breakdown of school count and survey times.

Table 2

School Respondent Count and Survey Administration

		<i>Survey Time</i>				
		Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Spring 2012	Spring 2013	Total
School Name	NE Traditional High	578	418	287	434	1717
	NW Traditional High	262	157	160	174	753
	SE Traditional High	552	389	227	314	1482
	SW Traditional High	376	355	183	246	1160
	NE Prep. Academy	214	121	95	90	520
	NW Prep. Academy	194	128	85	109	516
	SE Prep. Academy	276	188	89	157	710
	SW Prep. Academy	0	160	63	71	294
Total		2452	1916	1189	1595	7152

Data and Statistical Results

Research Question 1: Is there a significant difference between at-risk students' perception of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?

The independent variable represented whether the students participated in the enhanced academic and social program of the Preparatory Academies. Students in the traditional high

schools (control group) did not participate in this program. The dependent variable was students' perception of teacher effectiveness as measured on the TSPS.

The total number of students who responded to all survey items over the four administrations (fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013) of the TSPS was used as the sample group from the Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools. The teacher effectiveness variable included 35 total responses using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 is Totally Untrue and 5 is Totally True.

An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses. To ensure the variance between the two groups were equal, the Levene's test for homogeneity of variance was conducted. For the teacher effectiveness variable, the F value for the Levene's test was .698 with a Sig. ($p > .05$) value of .403. The Sig. value is greater than the alpha of .05; therefore, homogeneity of variance is assumed.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the Preparatory Academies' program on at-risk students' perception of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies and at-risk students' perception of teacher effectiveness at four traditional high schools in a large urban school district. The ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference in at-risk students' perception of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 7150) = 40.341, p = .000$]. Sig. is $< .05$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The mean student perception score for the Preparatory Academies ($M = 3.58, SD = .738$) was significantly different from the traditional high school ($M = 3.71, SD = .749$). See Table 3 for the means and standard deviations for each of these groups.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Student Perceptions of Teacher Effectiveness

<i>Schools</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Preparatory Academies	2040	3.5834	.73764
Traditional Schools	5112	3.7074	.74935
Total	7152	3.6721	.74808

The mean student perception score for Teacher Effectiveness was significantly higher for the traditional high school students in comparison with the Preparatory Academies' students. These results suggest the traditional high school students had more positive perceptions of teacher effectiveness.

Research Question 2: Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of school safety at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of school safety in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?

The independent variable represented whether the students participated in the enhanced academic and social program of the Preparatory Academies. Students in the traditional high schools (control group) did not participate in this program. The dependent variable was students' perception of school safety as measured on the Tripod Survey.

The total number of students who responded to all survey items over the four administrations of the TSPS was used as the sample group from the Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools. The safety construct included seven questions using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 is Totally Untrue and 5 is Totally True.

An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses. The Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was conducted. The result of the Levene's test for school safety was an F value of 38.361 with a Sig. ($p < .05$) value of .000. The test for homogeneity of variance between the Preparatory Academies and the traditional high schools was significant. Therefore, the assumption was made that equal variance between the Preparatory Academies and the traditional high schools had not been met. Because the assumption of homogeneity of variance had been violated, the Welch statistical test was conducted to adjust the F ratio. There was a statistically significant difference in at-risk students' perception of school safety at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 4046.36) = 28.78, p = .000$]. Sig. is $< .05$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The mean score for the Preparatory Academies ($M = 3.42, SD = .771$) was significantly different from the traditional high schools ($M = 3.53, SD = .836$). See Table 4 for the means and standard deviations for each of these groups.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Student Perceptions of School Safety

<i>Schools</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Preparatory Academies	2040	3.4174	.77092
Traditional Schools	5112	3.5284	.83602
Total	7152	3.4967	.81946

These results suggest there is a difference in perception of school safety.

The traditional high school students had a higher mean perception score than the Preparatory Academies' students which implies that the traditional high school students' perception of school safety was more positive than that of the Preparatory Academy students.

Research Question 3: Is there a significant difference between at-risk students' perception of social support at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of social support in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?

The independent variable represented whether the students participated in the enhanced academic and social program of the Preparatory Academies. Students in the traditional high schools (control group) did not participate in this program. The dependent variable was students' perception of social support as measured on the Tripod Survey.

The total number of students who responded to all survey items over the four administrations (fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013) of the TSPS was used as the sample group from the Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools. The social support variable included seven total responses using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 is Totally Untrue and 5 is Totally True.

An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses. The Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was conducted. For the social support variable, the F value for Levene's test was 1.061 with a Sig. ($p > .05$) value of .303. The Sig. value is greater than the alpha of .05; therefore, homogeneity of variance is assumed.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the Preparatory Academies' program on at-risk students' perception of social support at the four Preparatory Academies and at-risk students' perception of social support at four traditional high schools in a large urban school district. The ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in at-risk students'

perception of social support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 7150) = 26.55, p = .000$]. Sig. is $< .05$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The mean student perception score for the Preparatory Academies ($M = 3.43, SD = .835$) was significantly different from the traditional high school ($M = 3.55, SD = .843$). See Table 5 for the means and standard deviations for each of these groups.

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations of Student Perceptions of Social Support

<i>Schools</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Preparatory Academies	2040	3.4336	.83522
Traditional Schools	5112	3.5470	.84254
Total	7152	3.5147	.84196

These results suggest that there is a significant difference in perception of social support between the Preparatory Academies' students and the comparison high schools' students. The students mean perception score for social support was higher for the Traditional high school students when compared to the mean social support score of the Preparatory Academies' students. These results imply that the traditional high school students have more positive perceptions of social support than Preparatory Academy students.

Research Question 4: Is there a significant difference between at-risk students' perception of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of academic support in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?

The independent variable represented whether the students participated in the enhanced academic and social program of the Preparatory Academies. Students in the traditional high schools (control group) did not participate in this program. The dependent variable was students' perception of academic support as measured on the Tripod Survey.

The total number of students who responded to all survey items over the four administrations of the TSPS was used as the sample group from the Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools. The academic support variable included seven total responses using a 5 point Likert-type scale where 1 is Totally Untrue and 5 is Totally True.

An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses. The Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was conducted. For the academic support variable, the F value for Levene's test was 1.142 with a Sig. ($p > .05$) value of .285. The Sig. value is greater than the alpha of .05; therefore, homogeneity of variance is assumed.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the Preparatory Academies' program on at-risk students' perception of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies and at-risk students' perception of academic support at four traditional high schools in a large urban school district. There was a statistically significant difference in at-risk students' perception of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 7150) = 26.55, p = .000$]. Sig. is $< .05$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The mean student perception score for the Preparatory Academies ($M = 3.43, SD = .835$) was significantly different from the traditional high school ($M = 3.55, SD = .843$). See Table 6 for the means and standard deviations for each of these groups.

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviations of Student Perceptions of Academic Support

<i>Schools</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Preparatory Academies	2040	3.7216	.83471
Traditional Schools	5112	3.8566	.83650
Total	7152	3.8181	.83816

These results suggest that there is a difference in perception of academic support between the Preparatory Academies' students and the comparison high school students. The traditional high school students' academic support mean perception score was higher than the academic mean perception score of students at the Preparatory Academies. The higher means score implies that the traditional high school students have more positive perceptions of academic support than Preparatory Academy students.

Research Question 5: Is there a statistical difference between at-risk students' graduation rate at the four Preparatory Academies and students' graduation rate in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?

The independent variable represented whether the students participated in the enhanced academic and social program of the Preparatory Academies. Students in the traditional schools (control group) did not participate in this program. The dependent variable was the graduation rate as recorded on the school report card.

The graduation rates of the Preparatory Academies and the four comparison traditional schools were obtained from the 2012 and 2013 school report cards located on the Tennessee State Department of Education website. Table 7 contains the graduation rate for each of the

academies and comparison schools for SY 2012 and SY 2013. A school level analysis of the graduation rate for the combined two years (2012 and 2013) was conducted resulting in a total number of eight cases. An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses.

The Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was conducted. For the graduation variable, the F value for Levene's test was .229 with a Sig. ($p > .05$) value of .649. The Sig. value is greater than the alpha of .05; therefore, homogeneity of variance is assumed.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the Preparatory Academies' program on at-risk students' graduation rate at the four preparatory Academies and the graduation rate of students (control group) at the four comparison traditional high schools. There was a statistically significant difference in at-risk students' graduation rate at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 6) = 14.16, p = .009$]. Sig. is $< .05$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The mean score for the Preparatory Academies ($M = 46.92, SD = 7.07$) was statistically significantly different from the traditional high schools ($M = 66.54; SD = 7.67$). See Table 8 for the means and standard deviations for each of these groups.

Table 7

Event Graduation Rates by School and Year

<i>Schools</i>	<i>Graduation Year/ Graduation Rate</i>	
	Spring 2012	Spring 2013
Northwest Preparatory Academy	57.60	47.80
Northwest Traditional High School	66.40	60.20
Southwest Preparatory Academy	30.70	38.70

<i>Schools</i>	(continued)	
	<i>Graduation Year/ Graduation Rate</i>	
	Spring 2012	Spring 2013
Southwest Traditional High School	55.00	59.00
Northeast Preparatory Academy	51.50	40.50
Northeast Traditional High School	71.80	71.40
Southeast Preparatory Academy	55.60	45.20
Southeast Traditional High School	72.20	75.60

Table 7 indicates the minimum and maximum graduation mean for the Preparatory Academies over the two year period was 36.99 and 53.10 respectively. The minimum and maximum graduation mean for the traditional comparison schools for the two year period was 57.07 and 73.81 respectively.

Table 8

Means and Standard Deviations of Graduation Rates

<i>Schools</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Preparatory Academies	4	46.92	7.07
Traditional High Schools	4	66.54	7.67
Total	8	56.73	12.52

Table 8 lists the means and standard deviations for the Preparatory Academies and the traditional high schools. These results show a difference in the graduation rate of the four Preparatory Academies and the four comparison traditional high schools during the school years

2011 – 2012 and 2012 – 2013. The traditional comparison schools' graduation rate was higher than the Preparatory Academies' graduation rate.

Summary

An investigation was conducted to gauge the effectiveness of Preparatory Academies in providing the intended enhanced academic and social support and increasing graduation rate. The results of the TSPS (fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013) were used to determine if there were statistically significant differences in students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support and the graduation rate in the four academies and four comparison traditional high schools serving students with similar SES demographics.

The data in this chapter reflect the findings of the five research questions including the statistical outcomes for significant relationships. A one-way ANOVA was conducted for research questions 1 - 5 to compare the effect of the Preparatory Academies' program on at-risk students' perception of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support, and the graduation rate and at-risk students' perceptions at four traditional high schools and the graduation rate. In each administration of the ANOVA, there was a statistical significant difference in students' perception.

- For question one, there was a statistically significant difference between students' perception of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional comparison high schools.
- For question two, there was a statistically significant difference between students' perception of school safety at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional comparison high schools.

- For question three, there was a statistically significant difference between students' perception of social support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional comparison high schools.
- For question four, there was a statistically significant difference between students' perception of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional comparison high schools.
- For question five, there was a statistically significant difference between the graduation rate of students at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional comparison high schools.

Chapter 5 includes a brief summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, and recommendation for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter includes a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, and recommendations for further research.

Summary of the study

The purpose of this study was to gauge the effectiveness of Preparatory Academies in providing the intended enhanced academic and social support, and increasing graduation rates. In 2009, the Preparatory Academies were instituted in a large urban school district in the south to address the drop-out problem of the at-risk and over-age for grade student population. The program design of the Preparatory Academies focuses on the social, emotional, and academic needs of students using researched based best practices to support at-risk learners. These methods include enriched academics, educational choices, student centered learning, caring environment, and an environment that emphasizes strengths, resources, and interpersonal relationships (Franklin et al, 2007).

A quasi-experimental post-test design was used in this study. This research utilized data from the Tripod Student Perception Survey (TSPS), a tool designed to measure student perceptions of the classroom instructional environment using seven central constructs labeled the seven C's (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010). This survey uses a Likert Scale with the following choices: totally untrue, mostly untrue, somewhat true, mostly true, and totally true. The seven C's framework is built upon whether teachers *care*, have *control* of the class, *clarify* concepts, *challenge* students, *captivate* by engaging students, *confer* by allowing students to

share their thoughts, and *consolidate* the learning through summarization (Crow, 2011). Four of these constructs were the focus of this study: care (social support), control (safety), clarify (academic support), and confer (social support). These four constructs (care, control, clarify and confer) are closely aligned to the Preparatory Academies' mission statement to provide a safe learning environment which supports students academically and socially ("Alternative Schools", 2014).

The SY 2011- 12 and SY 2012-13 School Report Card, a comprehensive summary of school-level data, for each of the four Preparatory Academies and four comparison high schools was used to gather data on the graduation rate.

The population of this study was 9th – 12th grade students who attended the Preparatory Academies and the four comparison traditional high schools during the school years 2011 – 12 and 2012 – 13 and completed the TSPS for fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013.

Permission to perform this study was sought and approved from the dissertation committee at the University of Mississippi, the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the Department of Research and Evaluation /Talent Management of the subject school district.

Discussion of the Findings

The null hypotheses in this research study were rejected in five out of five research questions. The data showed a statistically significant difference in the at-risk students' perception of school climate characteristics (as measured by TSPS) in the Preparatory Academies and the comparison traditional high schools. A statistically significant difference in the graduation rate of these two groups was also found.

The findings of this study are discussed in the paragraphs below. Each hypothesis is addressed separately with supporting data analysis to describe the independent variable, the enhanced academic and social program design offered by the Preparatory Academies, and the dependent variables of student perceptions of teacher effectiveness, safety, social support, academic support (as measured by the TSPS); and the graduation rate.

Null Hypothesis 1

There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the Preparatory Academies' program on at-risk students' perception of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies and at-risk students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness at the four comparison traditional high schools. An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses. The teacher effectiveness variable included 35 items using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 is Totally Untrue and 5 is Totally True.

The ANOVA showed a statistically significant difference between at-risk students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness in the four comparison traditional high schools at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 7150) = 40.341, p = .000$]. Since Sig. is $< .05$, the null hypothesis is rejected. In looking at the mean score on the perception of teacher effectiveness, the students at the traditional high schools had a higher mean student perception score ($M = 3.71, SD = .749$) than the students' mean perception score in the Preparatory Academies ($M = 3.58; SD = .738$) and a higher variance. A post hoc test was not run due to the comparison of only two groups.

The data indicates that the at-risk students at the four comparison traditional high schools had a more positive perception of teacher effectiveness than the at-risk students attending the four Preparatory Academies. The teacher effectiveness measure consisted of the seven constructs (care, control, clarify, confer, challenge, captivate, and consolidate) on the TSPS. The mean student perception score for teacher effectiveness was derived from the combined 35 items from these seven constructs. The seven C's can be summarized into statements which captures the meaning of each construct ("Teacher Report", 2012):

- Care: "I am dedicated to your success as my student and concerned about you as an individual."
- Clarify: "I understand that students learn material in different ways. I am always willing to offer alternate explanations when one or more students experience difficulty making connections or understanding the lesson."
- Control: "I keep students on task, ensure that interactions are meaningful, and maximize instructional time."
- Challenge: "I consistently maintain high expectations for all students and insist that they think outside the box."
- Captivate: I ensure that lessons are engaging. My students are interested in classroom activities because they are able to make connections to their everyday lives."
- Confer: "My students are active participants in the learning process. They are comfortable discussing what they have learned and asking questions."
- Consolidate: "I utilize various strategies check for understanding and to ensure that my students understand how lessons connect across disciplines."

Dr. Ronald Ferguson, founder of the Tripod Project, posited that if teachers are teaching effectively on all seven dimensions of the 7 C's framework, students are going to be more engaged in what is happening in the classroom. He submits that through this engagement, students will do the work which will lead to increased learning (Crow, 2010).

As cited earlier in this study, students who attend the Preparatory Academies are faced with advantages and challenges. These students can earn more credits in a given year than students in a traditional high school which helps to accelerate their progress towards graduation. An accelerated course offering may require more support for at-risk students who often have experienced academic difficulty/failure which led to some repeating a grade (OAG). Struggling learners who are expected to do more relevant and rigorous coursework in a shortened time frame may view the support received from their teacher as inadequate. This could be due in part to their below grade level performance and lack of readiness skills needed to perform grade level work (Barton, 2005). These reasons may impact their perceptions of overall teacher effectiveness.

The teacher effectiveness measure includes multiple areas of support identified by research as critical for intervention programs designed for at-risk students. Dynarski, et al (2008) suggested addressing multiple risk factors in intervention programs for potential drop-outs. Their approach included helping students improve academically and to reengage in school, providing programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills, assigning adult advocates, and creating a learning environment where academic, social, and behavior success is encouraged. The findings in this study of the Preparatory Academies' program design support this research. The Preparatory Academies' program has incorporated most of the concepts outlined in Dynarski, et al (2008) research, including enriched academics, individualized

learning plans, intense counseling program, instruction with behavioral intervention, and social support (“Alternative Schools”, 2014).

The students’ teacher effectiveness mean perception score ($M = 3.58$) on a 5-point scale shows a positive view of overall teacher effectiveness at the Preparatory Academies.

Null Hypothesis 2

There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of school safety at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.

The independent variable is the enhanced academic and social program of the Preparatory Academies. Students in the traditional high schools (control group) did not participate in the Preparatory Academy’s program. The dependent variable was students’ perception of school safety as measured on the TSPS.

The students who responded to all survey items over the four administrations of the TSPS provided the sample group from the Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools. The safety construct included seven questions using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 is Totally Untrue and 5 is Totally True.

Because the assumption of homogeneity of variance had been violated, the Welch statistical test was conducted to adjust the F ratio. When homogeneity is violated, the one way ANOVA can yield an inaccurate p -value leading to the probability of a false-positive of higher than 5%. The Welch test is a more rigorous test and is used when variances are not equal. The outcome showed a statistically significant difference in at-risk students’ perception of school safety at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk

students at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 4046.36) = 28.78, p = .000$]. Sig. is $< .05$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The mean score for the Preparatory Academies ($M = 3.42, SD = .771$) was significantly different from the traditional high schools ($M = 3.53, SD = .836$). The TSPS measured whether students felt the classroom environment was free of unwarranted/inappropriate behaviors from peers that caused interference with the teacher's ability to govern and teach the class. It measured their perception of the teacher's ability to control the class in a respectful manner (e.g., Student behavior in this class makes the teacher angry.) (Ramsdell, 2012). This construct also measured students' perception of time management and student engagement in the learning process. For example, students were asked if their class stays busy and doesn't waste time.

The traditional high school students' results expressed a higher positive perception of control (safety) in their learning environments when compared to the results from the Preparatory Academies. The lower safety mean perception score of the Preparatory Academies is not surprising. The population of the Preparatory Academies is composed of at-risk students who have repeated one or more grades and performed below grade level expectations. Studies have revealed that students who perform below grade level often exhibit behavior problems (APA, 2012, Barton, 2005; MacIver & Groginsky, 2011). A higher number of at-risk learners in a school setting could increase the chances of more behavior problems; thus, impact perception scores of classroom control.

A safe learning environment is one of the tenets of the Preparatory Academies' program. The lower safety mean perception score of the Preparatory Academies implies that additional focus on classroom control is needed in order for students to feel safe while at school; thereby,

decreasing the likelihood of students leaving school due to an insecure learning environment APA, 2012).

Null Hypothesis 3

There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of social support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.

During the administration of the TSPS for fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012 and spring 2013 a total of 7,152 respondents from the four Preparatory Academies and the four comparison traditional high schools responded to seven items on the TSPS which measured their perception of social support in their learning environment. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test the null hypothesis: There is no statistically significant difference between student perceptions of social support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.

The ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in at-risk students' perception of social support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 7150) = 26.55, p = .000$]. Sig. is $< .05$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. The difference in the mean score ($M = 3.43$; $SD .835$) for the Preparatory Academies and the traditional high schools' mean score ($M = 3.55$; $SD .843$) was significant. The student mean perception scores on social support indicate the at-risk students at the comparison traditional high schools have a higher average score than the at-risk students at the Preparatory Academies. Students at the comparison traditional high school had a higher positive perception of the social environment in their school.

The TSPS results revealed the traditional high school students scored the constructs of “care” and “confer” (social support) at a higher level than students at the four Preparatory Academies. The traditional students perceived to a greater degree that their success and well-being were significant to their teachers; their teachers really care about them. Traditional students expressed a deeper feeling of the existence of a personal relationship with their teachers, i.e., teachers could distinguish their moods and attempt to better understand how they felt about things. Students perceived their feelings really mattered to their teachers and what they said really mattered (they had a voice in classroom decisions). They saw their teacher as being more willing to take time to listen to their thoughts and ideas and act upon them. The traditional students sensed a higher level of social support.

A student who is at-risk of dropping out of school needs to feel that he/she belongs and that someone cares about their well-being. The sense of belonging (social support) is one of the basic needs in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory. Maslow proposed in his original five stages model that people have social needs that must be met in order to achieve at a higher emotional level (self-actualization). Social needs were defined as belongingness, affection and love (McLeod, 2007). This theory is applicable to the classroom environment where the basic need of belonging must be met before at-risk students are able to reach level four, esteem needs, (achievement, mastery, self-respect, respect for others) and the highest level, self-actualization (realizing personal potential) (McLeod, 2007).

In an examination of effective high school drop-out prevention programs (Wirth-Bond, 1991) stated that a significant other in the school setting to whom students can freely share their emotional thoughts to can have a positive effect on students choosing to stay in school. Social

support is very important to the at-risk student. The quality of the relationship between the student and teacher significantly impacts a student's success (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

As previously stated, research has indicated social support as a key component of a school environment serving at-risk students (Davis & Dupper, 2004). The results of the survey infer that a significant number of Preparatory Academy students have a desire for a more caring classroom environment; thus, suggesting that a need exists for additional work to be done to create a more caring and supportive environment for all students. A renewed focus in this area will support the goals of the Preparatory Academies to provide social support and increase graduation rates of its students.

Null Hypothesis 4

There is no a statistical difference between at-risk students' perceptions of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies, and students' perceptions of academic support in four traditional high schools in a large urban school district?

The independent variable represented whether the students participated in the enhanced academic and social program of the Preparatory Academies. Students in the traditional high schools (control group) did not participate in this program. The dependent variable was students' perception of academic support as measured on the Tripod Survey.

The total number of students who responded to all survey items over the four administrations of the TSPS was used as the sample group from the Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools. The academic support variable included seven total responses using a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 is Totally Untrue and 5 is Totally True.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the Preparatory Academies' program on at-risk students' perception of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies

and at-risk students' perception of academic support at four traditional high schools in a large urban school district. There was a statistically significant difference in at-risk students' perception of academic support at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 7150) = 26.55, p = .000$]. Sig. is $< .05$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

The mean student perception score for the Preparatory Academies ($M = 3.43, SD = .835$) was significantly different from the traditional high school ($M = 3.55, SD = .843$). These results suggest that there is a difference in perception of academic support between the Preparatory Academies' students and the comparison high school students. Traditional high school students have more positive perceptions of academic support than Preparatory Academy students.

Students at the traditional high school experienced a higher degree of academic support. They responded to questions about good teaching strategies (e.g., My teacher asks questions to be sure we are following along when s/he is teaching.; My teacher explains difficult things clearly.; My teacher checks to make sure we understand what s/he is teaching us.; If you don't understand something, my teacher explains it another way.; and The comments that I get on my work in this class help me understand how to improve.). These questions give the reader an understanding of how successful teachers should academically support students; especially students who are at-risk. While no particular construct (safety, social support, academics) can stand alone in its importance to the success of the at-risk learner, the construct of academics is what one usually sees as the primary responsibility of a school.

Null Hypothesis 5

There is no statistically significant difference between student graduation rate at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students in the same district.

The independent variable represented whether the students participated in the enhanced academic and social program of the Preparatory Academies. Students in the traditional schools (control group) did not participate in this program. The dependent variable was the graduation rate as recorded on the school report card.

A school level analysis of the graduation rate for the combined two years (2012 and 2013) was conducted resulting in a total number of eight cases. An alpha level of .05 was used for all analyses.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the Preparatory Academies' program on at-risk students' graduation rate at the four Preparatory Academies and the graduation rate of students (control group) at the four comparison traditional high schools. There was a statistically significant difference in at-risk students' graduation rate at the four Preparatory Academies and the four traditional high schools serving at-risk students at the $p < .05$ level [$F(1, 6) = 14.16, p = .009$]. Sig. is $<.05$; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. The mean score for the Preparatory Academies ($M = 46.92, SD = 7.07$) was significantly different from the traditional comparison high schools ($M = 66.54; SD = 7.67$). A key point for future research (and a methodological limitation of this work) is what this number would have been for Preparatory Academy students without the Preparatory Academies.

The outcome of the ANOVA shows the traditional high school students' event graduation rate is significantly higher than the Preparatory Academies' event graduation rate. The degree of

the difference in the mean graduation rates was surprising. However, these results are supported by research when you consider the OAG population make-up of the Preparatory Academies. Research on concise OAGS graduation rate as a solo group is limited. The OAG graduation rates are usually blended in with the total number of event and cohort graduation rates. According to Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton (2002), by ninth grade, the OAG population is 30 – 50% of all students. These students will have been retained at least once previous to entering ninth grade. They posit that retained students are 2 – 11 times more likely to drop out during high school than non-retained students. These students (OAGS) are at a higher risk than others of becoming a dropout. Berlinder et al (2008), posited the drop-out rate increases with students who are past the typical school age. In 2003, the high school dropout rate for students ages 15 – 16 was 2.5%; age 17 was 2.9%; age 19 registered at 5.7% and ages 20 – 24 reflected a 20.8% dropout rate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Implications

The purpose of this study was to gauge the effectiveness of Preparatory Academies in providing the intended enhance academic and social support as measured by TSPS and increasing graduation rates. Each of the schools under study in this research served a low SES population who because of poverty are considered at-risk. Poverty has been linked as the number one demographic reason students are at risk of dropping out of school (APA, 2012; Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Dianda, 2008; Zuckerbrod, 2007). There are sufficient empirical data that support the assumption that students who are living in poverty (low SES) and attend weak promoting schools have a 50% chance of dropping out of school (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

Franklin et al., (2007) research focused on characteristics of an effective drop-out prevention program. They proposed that effective drop-out prevention programs provide

enriched academics, educational choices, student centered learning, caring environment, and an environment that emphasizes strengths, resources, and interpersonal relationships. These school characteristics are evident in the Preparatory Academies program but not as strong as traditional high schools.

When viewing the preparatory academies' mean score for each dependent variable, there is evidence that the program is providing the desired academic and social impact on many of its students. Each mean perception score was at a 3.41 level or higher on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The academic mean perception score had the greatest overall positive response at 3.72. This score indicates that a significant number of preparatory academies' students are viewing their teacher as one who is providing the academic support needed to be successful in school. If at-risk students feel successful in learning the materials in the classroom, they are more likely to stay in school (APA, 2012). This outcome addresses one of the reason students list as "why" they drop out of school. When polled as to why they leave school, one of the reasons listed by many students is falling behind in school (Barton, 2005). Research (APA, 2012) shows students who fall behind academically and experience failure have a difficult time catching up with their peers. These students are at risk of repeating a grade and dropping out before completing their high school years.

The construct with the lowest score on the TSPS for the preparatory academies was school safety. This construct received a mean perception score of $M = 3.41$. Behavior problems and below grade level performance have been linked together. Students who lack the skills to complete the assigned task usually resort to distractors to mask deficits or engage in negative behaviors due to idleness (APA, 2012; Barton, 2005; MacIver & Groginsky, 2011). Although the control construct had the lowest rating, the results indicate that a significant number of

students at the Preparatory Academies felt safe in their classroom. The higher rating given to the academic construct ($M = 3.72$) on the TSPS suggests that at-risk students are able to focus and learn in spite of any perceived behavioral concerns that may be drawn from the lower mean perception score of safety. These results give hope that the Preparatory Academies are having the desired academic and social impact on the at-risk student population.

The TSPS measured students' perception of teacher effectiveness at Preparatory Academies at a mean average score of ($M = 3.58$) on a 5-point Likert-type scale. While this score was less than the comparison high schools' perception mean score; it is a score with positive implications. Translating the overall teacher effectiveness means score into increasing the graduation rate tends to be a work in progress. When comparing the Preparatory Academies' graduation rate mean score ($M = 46.92$) and the Preparatory Academies' teacher effectiveness mean score ($M = 3.58$), there appears to be a negative correlation. The means graduation rate of ($M = 46.92$) indicate a continued need to consistently implement research based best practices that will support at-risk students and a continued need to reflect on data sources such as the TSPS to improve graduation rates.

The mean event dropout percent rate chart for the years under study in this research is included in the appendix to offer additional information regarding the graduation rate (See Appendix B, Event Dropout Rate Table A1). The Preparatory Academies' graduation rate mean score ($M = 46.92$) points to a continued need for more work to be done to increase the graduation rate of the at-risk student population.

The one big question not addressed in this research is what graduation rate would be for these at-risk students without the Preparatory Academies. As a four year old program, the preparatory academies seem to hold promise as an intervention program designed to meet the

academic, social, and safety needs of at-risk students. More time is needed to determine the overall effectiveness of the program leading to a statistically significant difference in the graduation rate of at-risk students.

Given the opportunity to further this research, efforts would be made to find similar OAGS in traditional high schools and compare them with OAGS attending the Preparatory Academies. Because of promised confidentiality in the surveys, there was no way to disaggregate survey data of OAGS in the Preparatory Academies and OAGS in traditional high schools. In addition to measuring students' perceptions, research could also be geared towards measuring students' growth through value added data and its impact on school completion rates.

Conclusion

The data from the TSPS (fall 2011, spring 2012, fall 2012, and spring 2013) is used to guide each Preparatory Academy and each of its teachers in addressing the at-risk students' perceptions of school climate characteristics. The use of this information in the revisions and adjustments of current strategies can have a powerful effect on students' perceptions; thereby, providing more targeted support for at-risk students and increasing graduation rates for student attending the preparatory academies.

According to Franklin et al, 2007, few empirical studies on drop-out prevention programs have been done to evaluate program effectiveness with strong designs. Based on empirical studies, these researchers defined an effective drop-out prevention program as one with enriched academics, educational choices, student centered learning, caring environment, and an environment that emphasizes strengths, resources, and interpersonal relationships. As cited earlier, the preparatory design offers enriched academics, social and emotional support and is closely align with the definition cited by Franklin et al (2007) of an effective drop-out prevention

program. A classroom environment which supports social, emotional, and academic learning has a positive effect on students' perception. In an educational setting where safety and order, caring relationship between students and teachers, and high academic expectations and support are present; students' attitude, behavior, and academic performance levels improve (APA, 2012).

By using the TSPS in measuring students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness and school climate characteristics, this research sought to measure the effectiveness of the Preparatory Academies' design in meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of at-risk students and increasing the graduation rate.

The outcome of this research posits students' perception of safety in their environment is a concern among the at-risk population at the Preparatory Academies and at the traditional comparison high schools. This construct received the lowest mean score among the three other constructs investigated in this study. A more in-depth study is recommended on how teachers (specifically in the Preparatory Academies) are providing a safe learning environment for at-risk students and its relationship to the graduation rate.

Further comprehensive studies on the differences in the four preparatory academies' implementation of social support (cares and confer), the construct with the second lowest mean perception score, could help the schools' efforts in enhancing the social support provided by teachers; thus, positively impacting the graduation rate (APA, 2012).

These two concepts (safety and social needs) are on the lower levels (two and three respectively) of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In order to feel safe (controls construct), students must perceive an environment where procedures, order, stability, and freedom from fear is met. Students need to feel a sense of belonging, affection, and love (care and confer constructs) for social needs to be met (McLeod, 2007). Safety and social needs are considered basic needs of

human beings. According to Maslow's theory (McLeod, 2007), these needs must be met before moving on to meet higher levels of growth needs such as self-esteem (achievement/mastery level) and self-actualization (talent pursue /fulfillment level). The end goal of the preparatory academies' mission is for its students to realize their ability to achieve in their course studies, graduate, and recognize post-secondary opportunities.

The nature of the Preparatory Academies' program and constraints of available data lends to several limitations to this study. The population of the study was restricted to low SES students in the subject's school district which limits the generalizability of the findings to other districts. However, some school districts may find the information from this research useful as they look at what research says about best practices for the at-risk student population and how at-risk students in this study perceived the practices being implemented. This study occurred in a large urban school district which also limits its relevance and generalizability to district serving non-low SES students and schools that serve students in rural areas. In addition, data from OAGS served by traditional schools is unavailable. Therefore, schools serving low SES students were used as a comparison group in this research. The unique characteristics of OAGS may result in some distortion of the findings. Given that the Preparatory Academies were created to meet the needs of students who tend to drop out and the mean graduation rate indicates that close to one-half of their students are graduating, it does appear the academies are making positive differences.

This study will benefit the subject local school district leaders and preparatory school administrators as they continue to seek solutions to increasing the graduation rate and decreasing the drop-out rate of at-risk students. Teachers at Preparatory Academies can use this research to

reflect on current practices and modify the learning environment in their classroom to better support students.

Perceptions are powerful, to the extent that those who are implementing programs can be blinded from the perceptive truths of those who are recipients of the programs. A person's perceptions have an impact on his or her emotions and behaviors. In turn, emotional and behavioral reactions to perceptions help to shape a person's environment and skew their views of the environment. Perceptions are the realities of students who experience the preparatory academies' program. Understanding these perceptions can provide teachers, school leaders, and superintendents with information to assist in support of at-risk learners.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH APPROVAL DOCUMENTS



Research, Evaluation, Assessment, and Student Information
Breakthrough Leadership. Breakthrough Results.

William E. White II
Executive Director
whitewe@mcsk12.net

November 13, 2012

Beverly Becton
becton@mcsk12.net

Ms. Becton,

After consideration of your proposal, *The Effects of Preparatory Academics for At Risk Students on the Graduation Rate*, we have approved your request to conduct a research study in the Memphis City Schools. You should use this letter as official notification of approval for your study.

I look forward to working with you in the completion of this project.

Please direct any inquiries to me via email at whitewe@mcsk12.net

Regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'William E. White II'.

William E. White II
Executive Director

From: irb@olemiss.edu
Sent: Friday, March 07, 2014 12:23 PM
To: bdbecton@bellsouth.net
Cc: DOUGLAS RAYMOND DAVIS
Subject: IRB Exempt Approval of 14x-184

Ms. Becton:

This is to inform you that your application to conduct research with human participants, "A Comparison of Preparatory Academies and Traditional High Schools in a Large Urban District of Completion Rate and Student Perceptions of School Climate Characteristics " (Protocol #14x-184), has been approved as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#4).

Please remember that all of The University of Mississippi's human participant research activities, regardless of whether the research is subject to federal regulations, must be guided by the ethical principles in The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

It is especially important for you to keep these points in mind:

- You must protect the rights and welfare of human research participants.
- Any changes to your approved protocol must be reviewed and approved before initiating those changes.
- You must report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the IRB at irb@olemiss.edu.

Jennifer Caldwell, PhD

Senior Research Compliance Specialist, Research Integrity and Compliance
The University of Mississippi
212 Barr
University, MS 38677-1848
U.S.A.
+1-662-915-5006
irb@olemiss.edu | www.olemiss.edu

APPENDIX B: EVENT DROPOUT RATES BY SCHOOL AND YEAR

Table A1

Event Dropout Rates by School and Year

<i>Schools</i>	<i>Graduation Year/ Event Dropout Rate</i>	
	Spring 2012	Spring 2013
Northwest Preparatory Academy	45.90	15.50
Northwest Traditional High School	21.90	8.70
Southwest Preparatory Academy	57.80	13.00
Southwest Traditional High School	13.50	8.70
Northeast Preparatory Academy	71.10	13.90
Northeast Traditional High School	9.10	6.10
Southeast Preparatory Academy	25.90	14.50
Southeast Traditional High School	15.20	5.40

VITA

BEVERLY D. BECTON

9731 Woodland Hills Drive
Cordova, TN 38018
901-756-6547

EDUCATION:

May 1989	Master of Education, Administration and Supervision University of Memphis Memphis, TN
May 1984	Bachelor of Science, Education University of Memphis Memphis, TN
May 1980	Bachelor of Science, Consumer Home Economics University of Memphis Memphis, TN

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

PRINCIPAL: Denver Elementary – (2000 – Present) Chief Administration Officer – Provided leadership in developing and implementing policies, programs, and curriculum. Developed/implemented operating budget and maintained fiscal soundness of organization.

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL – (1995 – 2000)

TEACHER – (1985 – 1995) K -12 Educator

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS:

- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)
- National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) former

ACCOMPLISHMENTS/COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:

- Appointed as Cluster Leader of seven area schools
- Selected to serve on the Principal's Advisory Committee to the Superintendent
- Memphis City School's district-wide procurement committee member.
- Past Treasurer – Memphis Principal Association.

- Inducted into Kappa Delta Honor Society
- State Legislative Intern – House Education Committee
- State Board of Regents Academic Scholarship
- Past Board member- Dismas House